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Pilot Grove

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Pilot Grove

During the Illinoian glaciation the present channel of the Mississippi River was obstructed by ice. Its waters were diverted from their natural course and swept southward along the western boundary of Henry County through the present valleys of the Skunk River and Big Cedar Creek, thence southeast up the channel of Little Cedar Creek, and across the prairies of southern Henry and northern Lee counties to the valley of Sugar Creek, whence the Mississippi returned to its former course below the present site of Fort Madison.

Where this stream passed over the prairies between Little Cedar and Sugar creeks, it excavated a wide channel now known as the Grand Valley. A branch of this valley heads in the eastern part of Marion Township in Lee County and extends westward to the middle of the township. There it turns south and connects with the Grand Valley. On the promontory partially encompassed by this crescent valley is the site of the once prosperous village of Pilot Grove.

The name Pilot Grove is significant. On the crest of the promontory, far removed from any forest growth, was a beautiful grove of elm trees. In the midst of this grove stood a giant elm, a veritable

monarch, towering above the stately trees that surrounded it. This grove could be seen for many miles across the prairies and served as a guide to the pioneer who journeyed over the plains to seek a home nearer to the setting sun. Hence the name of Pilot Grove. Many early settlers were guided to their destination by this friendly and unerring pilot.

Perhaps the first white man to discover this noted landmark was Alexander Cruikshank, a worthy pioneer of 1834. The discovery of the grove can best be told in the language of his son, J. P. Cruikshank of Fort Madison:

"My father on March the fourth 1834 procured a canoe at the town of Commerce, now Nauvoo, Illinois, and took aboard a few personal effects and provisions. Being a sailor of fifteen years experience, he readily rigged up a mast and using a blanket for a sail, he easily sailed up the river eight miles, landing at the site of Old Fort Madison, marked by two of the old stone chimneys, the barracks having been destroyed by fire over twenty years before. There were two or three cabins at the landing, occupied by settlers, some of whom had made settlement before the country was opened for that purpose, and had been removed a year previously by government dragoons. Remaining over night at the fort, my father the next morning boldly started for the interior wilderness, afoot and alone, selecting a site for his future home in a point of timber jutting into the windswept prairies on the headwaters of Sutton

Creek, fifteen miles northwest of the old fort and about three miles south of the present village of Lowell on Skunk River.

“My father being unsatisfied with his location, began after he had planted his small crop to reconnoiter for one where the soil was more fertile and the water facilities better. He had learned from an Indian who had stopped over night at his cabin of a fine spring of water about seven miles southwest. Taking my father to a high point on the prairies nearby he pointed in the direction of the spring and to a grove that stood boldly out on the prairie about five miles due west. Four miles to the south the Indian called his attention to a high point of timber (the site of the present town of West Point). By means of broken English, signs, grunts and gestures in which an Indian is past master in making himself understood, he made it clear to my father that in order to find the spring he must follow the course pointed out, keeping the elm grove to the right and the point of timber to the left, about equally distant from the course line; after crossing Big Sugar Creek, he would see another grove or point of timber ahead, where he would find the flowing spring.

“Not long after this occurrence father started in quest of what he feared might turn out to be another fabled fountain of youth with which the Indians lured the early Spanish adventurers. . . . The land on which the elm grove stood is about the highest point in Lee county, and could be seen for miles

around. Keeping the grove to the right and crossing Sugar Creek at a point now known as Pilot Grove station, my father found the spring in the edge of the point of timber just as the Indian had described. Here father made his second claim, on which he built another cabin on the exact site now enclosed and known as the Clay Grove or Howard cemetery, where he, my mother and other members of the family lie buried.”

From that time on the high elm grove became generally known as Pilot Grove. The early settlers’ trail from Fort Madison to the Aaron Street settlement at Salem and the trail from Burlington to a settlement on the Des Moines River crossed at or near Pilot Grove. Long before the advent of the white men the aborigines used this grove as a guide.

Iowa settlers were not slow in discovering the beauties of such locations and their natural advantages for the founding of villages. Jonathan Jones, an enterprising and thrifty pioneer, claimed the land on the promontory in 1837 and acquired title to the same in 1840. At this early date, when all around was a trackless plain, Mr. Jones was imbued with the idea of founding a town. He planted a grove of black locust trees in the form of a square, the trees being arranged in regular order, and he enclosed this grove with a fence of elaborate design. Near the grove he set apart a plot of land for a cemetery and there Mrs. Jones was the first to be buried. In 1851 the government established a postoffice, giving it the

name of Pilot Grove and Jonathan Jones became the first postmaster. Attracted by the beauty of the location and the richness of the surrounding prairie many settlers established their homes nearby. On March 20, 1858, the town was regularly laid out and platted by George Berry, deputy county surveyor. This plat is on section 10, township 69, range 6. The platting was approved by J. A. Goodrich, acting county judge, and was filed in the office of the county recorder on April 16, 1858.

The town grew rapidly: George H. Moon and son opened a store for general merchandise, E. B. Ringland soon followed with a dry goods store, Townsend Hubb established a shop for the manufacture of wagons, buggies, and farm implements, and Enos Neal set up as a blacksmith. Schools and churches were established and Pilot Grove became the community center for the surrounding country. The park with its ample grove of shade trees furnished a delightful place for all outdoor meetings. Here the Fourth of July was celebrated in real pioneer fashion. Speakers of note fired hot oratorical shot into British tyranny and lauded the virtues of the American patriots.

Pilot Grove was the focus of the intellectual activities of the surrounding communities. Literary societies were organized where the younger generations practiced the art of elocution, and local orators discussed many problems of government and philosophy in the forum of debate.

In ante-bellum days, Professor Belding, an elocutionist and reader of considerable ability, conducted schools of elocution at Salem, Chestnut Hill, Lowell, Pilot Grove, Dover, and other points. At the close of these schools a grand contest for championship was to be held. No more fitting place could be found for such a gathering than the public park of Pilot Grove. Great interest was manifested in these exercises. The day set for this occasion proved to be ideal and people from the surrounding country came to the park in large numbers. The audience was estimated to have included from six hundred to a thousand people. Judge John Van Valkenburg of Fort Madison, Joel C. Garretson of Henry County, and Joseph D. Hoag of Chestnut Hill were chosen as judges of the contest. The audience was highly entertained and the honors were fairly distributed. Miss Lizzie Mitchell of Salem received first prize. Her selection was "Hiawatha". "Regulus", rendered by Caleb Weir of Pilot Grove, was given second place. Lydia Ellen Townsend, also of Pilot Grove, received third place. Miss Lizzie Wiggins of Salem was given the premium for making the best appearance on the platform. She spoke Poe's "Raven". John E. Mitchell and Miss Sue Wiggins received honorable mention.

The population of Pilot Grove never exceeded three hundred people, but its importance as a community center was out of proportion to its population. Here the farmers for miles around received

their mail, went to church, talked politics, did their trading, and found a market for the stock and produce of the farm.

Four church organizations were maintained in the town: Baptist, Presbyterian, Friends, and Universalist. Only two church buildings were erected, however — Baptist and Quaker. The Presbyterians held their services in the Baptist church while the Universalists occupied the public hall. The town was well supplied with ministers. Samuel Pickard and Zehn Leweling taught that immersion was essential to salvation. Reverend McNight preached the time-honored doctrine of election, while at the head of the Quaker meeting sat Ephraim B. Ratliff who on occasion when the spirit moved him to utterance proclaimed the glad tidings of peace on earth and good will to men. Joshua Hicks and Joel C. Garretson believed that as Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost He would through God's infinite love finally restore the whole family of mankind to holiness and happiness. Thus the various phases of religious thought had their adherents and devoted champions.

Pilot Grove also presented a field for political activity. In the ever memorable campaign of 1860 the picturesque "Wide-awakes" from various towns with their oil cloth caps and capes and their greasy lamps marched and countermarched. Here also the followers of the "Little Giant", their hickory clubs bedecked with ribbons of the national colors, gave

their spectacular parades, while venders of refreshments openly sold "Douglas whiskey" and cider to the thirsty throng. No political campaign was complete without a grand rally at Pilot Grove .

During the Civil War the political feeling was very intense. An anecdote will illustrate the spirit of the times. One evening in the fall of 1862 several hundred men had gathered at the schoolhouse to listen to orators from Keokuk uphold the Union cause and hear the glee club from Fort Madison sing the war songs of the hour. After the meeting was over and the men had assembled in the yard one enthusiastic citizen drew a pistol from his pocket and fired at random in the air. This seemed to be a signal for in a moment the place resounded with pistol shots from the whole assembly. It seemed as if every man was armed and ready for immediate action should occasion arise.

About 1867 a high school was established and Professor Morrison instructed the youth in the higher branches of learning. Morrison was followed by Eli Beard of sainted memory. Beard was an educator of wide experience and was much beloved by his pupils. A monument erected to his memory at Milo, Iowa, by his former pupils stands a witness to the love and esteem in which he was held. In 1871 the schoolhouse was destroyed by a tornado. The enterprising citizens soon replaced the structure with a more commodious building and the high school was again opened with C. M. Frazier and Belle Coleman

Frazier, his wife, as instructors. The school prospered for a time but the citizenship of the surrounding country changed and the school was finally closed. Frazier entered the law and afterwards became Attorney General of Arizona.

The town of Pilot Grove was also doomed. Two causes contributed directly to its decline. About two and one-half miles southeast a settlement of German Catholics was established about the village of St. Paul. These Germans were an industrious and frugal people. They rapidly extended their holdings and soon absorbed the surrounding land. The interests of these people were not at Pilot Grove but were centered in the village and church of St. Paul. The children were sent to the parochial school and public education was abandoned.

Pilot Grove had flourished without a railroad. In 1880 a branch of the Burlington road was constructed from Keokuk to Mt. Pleasant, passing four miles to the westward. A few years later another branch of the Burlington extending from Fort Madison to Ottumwa was located two miles south of the village — the final cause that ended the career of Pilot Grove. The trade of the country was naturally diverted to the shipping points on these roads, and Pilot Grove was left without adequate financial support. To add insult to injury a station on the Ottumwa line now bears the name of Pilot Grove.

To-day the original village is no more: the buildings have long since been wrecked, and the streets

and alleys have become a part of the adjacent farms. The public park — the one time pride of the village — is unenclosed and only a few straggling and ragged trees remain to tell the glories of the past. The historic and stately elms that played such an important part in the days of the pioneers have succumbed to the ruthless hand of utility. This beauty spot of nature, once vibrant with life and energy, is as silent to-day as it was when the stranger guided his footsteps by the lofty pilot of the plains.

O. A. GARRETSON